

# John David Ebert's Semiotic Vacancy

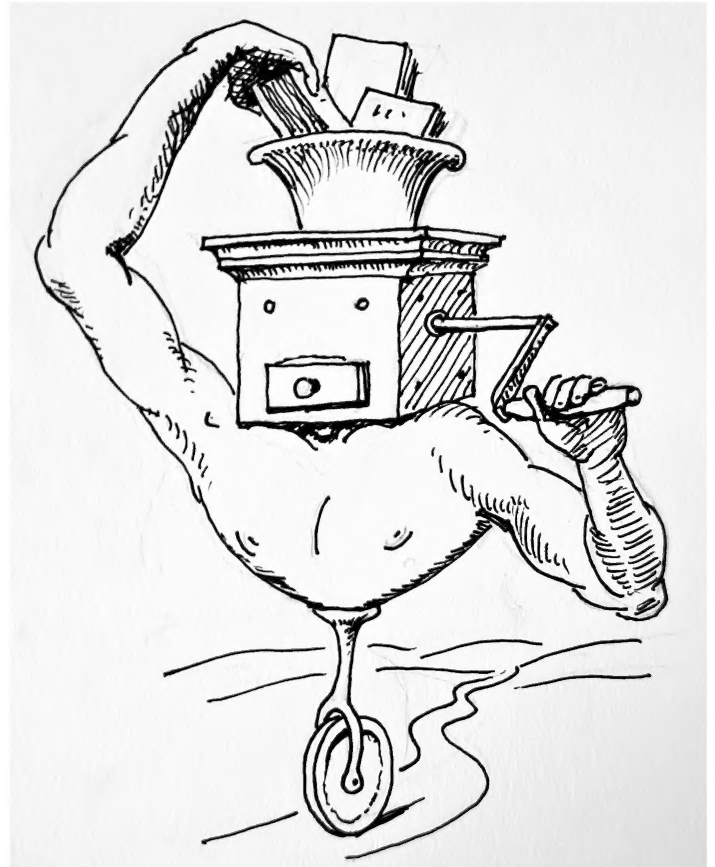
PAUL RHOADS

There is a type of public intellectual I call 'grey powder merchants'. They are like coffee grinders: beans are poured into a funnel at the top and ground coffee is milled into a tray below. Not beans but anything of a philosophical, historical, moral or artistic nature is ingested by these guys, and what comes out is a fine, grey powder, a reliably consistent product of the crank driven grinder between funnel and mouth. They have read everything. Like the sophists Socrates had to deal with, they pretend to know everything. They talk fluently. They publish a steady stream of screeds and tomes. They are neither stupid nor dishonest . . . not exactly dishonest — unless you call indifference to reality and total absorption in a wonderful world of verbal arabesques and abstractions in the service of money-getting and flattery 'dishonest'.

John David Ebert is such a one; a sophist of our time. A flatterer; he flatters those in the precarious situation of 'contemporary art' — which might be compared to the Bastille in 1788, the Russian imperial government in 1816 or the Weimar republic in the early 1930s. 'Contemporary art' is the emblem of our post-truth and post-law masters, a passel of soulless mercantile oligarchs who, though presently in a position of overwhelming dominance, are surrounded by a growing crowd of discontented peasants, over-excited idealists, and organized thugs. These are the Yellow Jackets, the Trumpists and Brexiteers, the Antifas and Proud Boys, or whatever 'populist' creature will next be called fourth from the underbelly of society by their provocations. Such provocations often take the form — if it can be called a form — of 'contemporary art'. One wonders if at least a few of these technocratic oligarchs are not asking themselves how many more monumental green plastic sex-toys, or other such wicked innovations, can be

inflicted upon an unconsulted demos without consequences. However complaisant most of them appear to be, Ebert would not bother performing his tricks if they weren't buying what he's selling, and his market is driven by fear.

Despite their present power, their vast economy of schools, galleries, museums and publications — despite the absence of a significant rival or recognized theoretical



challenge — 'contemporary artists' are perched on ontological ejection seats. More or less obscurely they realize this.

The flattery Ebert lavishes on them is less praise, less description, analysis and explanation of their "original" and "important" "work", than something more fundamental, for praise and analysis of 'contemporary art' must, first of all, repose on something more basic than the 'work' itself, namely the fiction that something which is not, is, or, more exactly: that 'contemporary art' is Art. Ebert himself cleverly calls it "a very different kind of art from anything that has ever been practiced in the past". And well he might, for anyone not already perverted by an Ebert style 'education' is perplexed, if not astonished or even scandalized, when informed that the stuff in question is 'art'.

If Ebert is going to legitimize 'contemporary art', he must meet the suspicion, the more and more openly expressed opinion, that it is not 'art', even of "a very different kind".

Ebert is a doctor of the church of 'contemporary art'. He is like the priests for whom the grey powder merchants of rationalism and materialism love to express disdain as profiteering promulgators of fable and myth, as comforters of weak and nervous beings troubled about their existential status. Like a priest in a pulpit his sermons are not for the scoffers and unbelievers who guffaw in the fleshpots outside the temple but for a faithful flock, quietly and obediently eager to hear 'good news'.





## Ebert's Bag of Tricks

Ebert's sermons are not for the great unwashed who fail to comprehend, much less appreciate, 'contemporary art'. Such backward folk are incapable of understanding even half a phrase out of Ebert's mouth. These knuckle-dragging plebs are, as Ebert himself might say: 'semiotically challenged'.

Not being semiotically challenged myself I understand what Ebert means when he says: "The beautiful canvasses of Mark Rothko [...] paint the semiotic vacancies at the heart of Being". Were this phrase meant for the common man it might be rendered into normal English as: "You miserable uncultured slob cannot understand the beauty of a Rothko, nor can you realize how cleverly I have tossed a plausible word salad to spuriously explain its alleged importance, namely calling a big square patch of color 'empty' yet qualifying that emptiness as somehow ultra real." The uncultured slob wouldn't understand this version much better than the original jargon but Ebert himself might admit it is a fair translation. It might even make him smile because, as I say, Ebert is obviously not a stupid man. But his fancy talk is not for the unwashed. It is for the 'artists', for all who live and die, materially or spiritually, by 'contemporary art'.

The basis of Ebert's success is his awareness of the precariousness of the 'contemporary art' situation, the insecurity of his audience and how much they would appreciate a robust justification of their fundamentally criminal activities. Like any good priest, Ebert offers them justification and he constructs this justification on a solid foundation: Arthur Danto's Warhol inspired proclamation of 'the death of art'.

Ebert's solution to this apparent impasse is as unoriginal as Danto's recognition of art's death in Warhol is obvious. At one point Ebert expresses it this way: "Each artist idiosyncratically constructs his own world, his own private semiosphere with its own logic". I did not have to wait until 2013 and the publication of 'Art After Metaphysics' to hear this justification. I heard it repeatedly in the 1970s, at a time when Ebert was not even ten years old. Ebert, of course, makes no claim to originality in this regard, and I do not fault him for using ideas which the advent of artistic post-modernism (with the fall of the iron curtain) — in other words 'the collapse of faith in historical progress' — has rendered unconvincing. I admire, rather, his audacity. Personally I would

never dare defend an idea I knew to be nonsense. I don't know for a fact that Ebert thinks the idea that each artist idiosyncratically constructs his own world is nonsense but he is not a stupid man and, strictly speaking, the idea that 'each artist idiosyncratically constructs his own world' is 'nonsense', for what is 'sense' without correspondence between signifier and signified?

If each 'art' is its own world with its own logic, there may be 'sense', or signifiers corresponding to a signified within each world according to the logic of each, but when speaking of 'contemporary art', or the ensemble of those worlds, signifiers universally applicable, by Ebert's own definition, are nuncupatory.

Is Ebert's slight of hand really so hard to see? If the art, the sense, the logic of a thing depends upon the dynamics of an

independent world, a horizon of discovery, a closed system of values proper only to itself, where there is no meaning, no comprehension, no art, except within that particular and unique context, we may, in charity and inevitable ignorance — for how can we know such a world? — admit that whatever it is generating internally is 'art' in some unknowable sense, but how can we possibly *know* this? Ebert himself affirms that these worlds cannot be compared, that they are "entirely different worlds altogether", "world islands" in which each artist is a priest officiating at the private mystery cult of which his art is the product. Each world is a 'private mystery'. Hard to imagine a more closed system!

Whatever is produced in these "idiosyncratic" "worlds" may be 'art' in the context of whatever that world 'is', but is that 'art' still 'art' in another world, in another context, for example the context of ordinary

life where we live together, in which communication between us is worthwhile, to say nothing of possible? What world is it where Ebert, though writing and speech, communicates with millions of his fellow humans and is, apparently, understood?

Ebert's trick depends on distractions which conceal from his unwary targets how he is hiding a rabbit in a hat he has just revealed to be empty. To prepare them for the notion of 'contemporary art' as products of disparate and idiosyncratic worlds, but also as the conglomerate of such products, X number of radically incommensurable worlds, he first proclaims that the history of art, in fact of humanity itself, is also such a set of radically incommensurable things, namely the pre-metaphysical, metaphysical and Post-metaphysical 'ages'.



This painting, from about 2010, according to Ebert would be an ontologically dead copy of, in his words: a "kitchy catholic sentimental clinging to an iconotype which has gone down the drain of history because of the collapse of the macrosphere". To me, however, it's a sincere effort to depict a scene from the bible, which I believe to be an historical event and which I have tried to depict as I imagine it. I, of course, do not get to be a semiotic world with my own logic. I'm just historical garbage.



This, of course, is a vulgarized elaboration of heideggerian historicism: each culture, in each age, is a world unto itself, a 'horizon of discovery' or, as Ebert puts it, a 'semiosphere with its own logic'. As Time trundles along, new 'worlds' or 'horizons of discovery', or 'semiospheres with their own logic' arise, each a closed book to the others. We cannot understand the past, which has another logic, another manner of being than ours.

Ebert's innovation, which is the innovation of 'contemporary art' from its inception, is to grant the status of 'semiosphere with its own logic' first to the different Cultures of History and then,



by extension, via a logorrhea of rationalization, to each individual 'artist' of today. But when anyone who says he is an 'artist' is an artist, potentially everyone is an artist. In Ebert's post-metaphysical age therefore, each and every one of us, at least potentially, is the generator of his very own semiosphere and logic. But, if this is the case, how can anyone understand anyone else? And why would anyone even bother addressing themselves to anyone else?

If the situation is what Ebert says it is, it is Babel, and no one can understand anyone else. Except we do. We not only understand each other, we also understand all those cultures in the past. Or at least Ebert does, and with astonishing glibness. It takes him only a few seconds to explain exactly how each one was and how the people of each age thought and felt. For example, in the pre-metaphysical age everyone felt like they were floating in amniotic fluid, while in the metaphysical age, the 'Age of the World Picture', Michelangelo and Hieronymus Bosch painted on the



'world dome' which was a manifestation of the 'perspectival age' and discovery of space.

## The Discovery of Perspective

The alleged discovery of perspective has always annoyed me, because although painting did indeed become decadent after the fall of the Roman empire, and even if Alberti and such people did make fine use of fully rationalized perspectival techniques, Alberti no more discovered perspective than he — or anyone else — invented space. Many Roman murals, for example, display full consciousness of space and perspective.

This Roman wall decoration from the Metropolitan museum in New York (left), with which I am very familiar, though not perspectivally consistent in the strict manner of Alberti, is fully perspectival throughout. The same is true of the so called 'Italian primitives' such as Duccio (above, 1255-1318)

who worked more than a century prior to the alleged 'discovery of perspective' (Alberti: 1425-1472). But no one is gushing, as they do of cubism, how such paintings use 'multiple spaces', thus 'breaking down space' — which is somehow



a good thing. Nor do they enthuse that it not only 'breaks down' but actually multiplies 'spaces', 'times' and 'points of view', as Ebert ridiculously does of cubism.

So, to say nothing of how the hyper-intellectualized claims for cubism, regarding perspective, space and point of view could, with equal reason, be applied to Roman frescos and the Italian primitives, it is also a fact that cubism has nothing to do with African

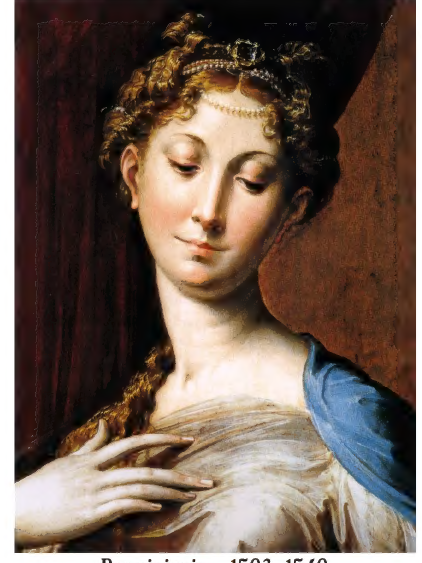




Michelangelo, 1475–1564



El Greco, 1541–1614



Parmigianino, 1503–1540

art, because it owes everything to the influence of Cezanne. The idea that cubism uses different points of view simultaneously is a rationalization invented by critics to justify cubism's distortions. But these famous distortions are only a traditional painting practice carried out in an exceptionally free, unbridled or, if you like, irresponsible manner; an impulse, endemic to its time, which sought to make painting more abstract, pure and about itself, while at the same time exploring ideas about expressiveness. All this is understandable without resort to philosophically dubious elucubrations. Ingres himself indulged in deformations, such as creating anatomically impossible figures (see page 26). Picasso simply went further in the same direction. But such expressive distortions have always been at the heart of the western painting tradition, to say nothing of other painting traditions. If western painting has gone farther than any other in the direction of illusion and realism, it has, no less than Asian, African or any other art tradition, always used expressive deformation. A special glory of western painting is how expressive deformation is used in conjunction with a mastery of illusion and realism. This conjunction was an aspect of

the painting tradition which the early modernists sought to restore. They were disappointed at growing 'academic' neglect of it, in favor of a uni-dimensional illusionist realism.

The deformations of cubism, fauvism, the Nabis and post-impressionism had nothing to do with a new mode of perception or some ontological evolution or any new kind of space — assuming there could be a new kind of space, which there cannot. The 2d wave modernists were exploring aspects of painting which had always been central to the western tradition, in ways which made sense at the time.

Since 1990, most of those ways should be understood as of historical interest

in the story of so called 'modernism' as an essentially reactionary effort to restore the glories of the old masters, menaced by 'academic' illusionist decadence. By the 1960s, however, modernism was also overwhelmed by the ideological mire it initially combatted. This matter merits a detailed treatment. Here it must suffice to indicate how certain catch phrases, irresponsible notions concocted during the 20th century to rationalize or justify various sorts of foolishness or even to gin up progressive 'innovation', today serve people like Ebert as they construct narratives comforting to the most sclerotic academicism which has ever



Paul Cezanne



Georges Braque. Note how this painting presents a coherent space, in no way ambiguous or unclear, not, as Ebert claims "melted down" and no less definite than the example of roman painting—see left—or even Ingres. The painting is busy but spatially coherent.



This painting does not use strict perspective, but not only does it use perspective, but it has a fully developed sense of space. Such spatial sense is natural to painting, and, except for the most primitive, deliberate of feigned, is more or less developed in painting of all times and societies.





James Joyce, by Jacques-Emile Blanche

shamed a human society. 'Perspective', 'space' and 'point of view', as they apply, or not, to roman, pre-Renaissance, Renaissance and 'modernist' painting are nice examples of this inanity. There are more but these should suffice to puff away the house of cards which is the pre-'contemporary art' progressive history narrative which Ebert elaborates as a basis for justification of 'contemporary art' itself. One example, also, will suffice to show the inanity of this justification.

### Duchampian Irony

Ebert credits Duchamp with introducing the 'banal object' as 'art'. According to Ebert the 'banal object' is a shard of the obsolete and shattered 'iconotypes' which constituted the defunct 'macrosphere'. The ensemble of these shards are Ebert's 'midden heap', or 'dung pile' — Ebert delights in associating excrement with the broken 'iconotypes', or bible stories, which were the subject of so much traditional painting.

The banal objects in question are, initially, Duchamp's 'Ready-mades'. But the Ready-mades are not 'art', nor are they 'banal'. In interviews readily accessible on YouTube, Duchamp explains what they are: rare things which are something like the opposite of art.

To understand Ebert's neglect of the facts of this

matter, we must know something about them ourselves. To begin with, it was for good and sufficient reasons, related to his time and personal experiences, that Duchamp, with the other dadaists, engaged in various unusual activities, the lowest common denominator of which was a serious yet playful exploration of what Art really is or can be. These explorations were sincere. They were neither nihilist nor cynical, and certainly not intended to come to the conclusion that anything is art, even if — and this is an aspect of his irony — Duchamp made certain declarations which have been seized upon as proving that 'anything can be art', while the context of those declarations and his words and acts pointing in other directions (e.g. 'rasée') are neglected. If Duchamp is ironic and playful, if his art and statements can be difficult to understand, one thing at least is clear: Duchamp did not endorse the idea that anything is art. His search did not culminate in the conclusion that the search was never worth undertaking in the first place since anything and everything, everywhere and always becomes 'art' by mere recontextualization.

'Recontextualization' is a fancy word for calling something 'art'.

Duchamp did say that what he says *is Art*, is Art, because, as an artist, he says it is. And he did say that he is an artist because *he says he is*. But that Duchamp says of *himself* that he is an artist does not mean that any knave or fool who says of *himself* that he is an artist is therefore also an artist. Duchamp was neither knave nor fool. Only fools fail to understand duchampian irony, and only knaves exploit his statements to garner prestige for themselves.

Dadaist motivations were artistic but had a unique historical context. The horrors of the first world war had breached the walls of complacent western optimism, of innocent faith in a progressive and harmonious future dominated by European science and post-christian morals. And even if early 'modernism' had combatted 'academic' decadence with much success, 2d wave 'modernism' had begun to fall into error. The cubists themselves, inspired more by political and philosophical ideology than artistic and painting concerns, constituted themselves as an ideologically driven academy, even worse than the official 19th century academy under such



Jacques-Emile Blanche





Igor Stravinsky, by Jacques-Emile Blanche

men like Bouguereau. Duchamp became their victim when he was ceremoniously excluded from their ranks, despite such paintings as the 'Nude Descending a Staircase'.

The dadaist were horrified, disgusted and disappointed with the world they found themselves in. The betrayal of their fellow 'modernists', to say nothing of the betrayal of the west generally, as exemplified by the cheerful murderousness of the war and academic illusionism in particular — Duchamp's complaints about 'retinal painting' is partly explained by the latter.

In some ways that situation resembles our own. I, at least, see the world around me as artistically chaotic, decadent and evil. No less than the dadaists I reject it altogether and, like Duchamp, am dedicated to a relentless and radical search for true Art, far from the madding crowd.

## Dada and Bohemia

An effort of imagination is required to recapture the mood and circumstances of the 1920s and 30s, to understand and sympathize with the attitudes and motivations of men like Marcel Duchamp and Tristan Tzara. There was then no 'art world' in the sense there is today. Instead there was a small but international community of people living in more or less 'bohemian' ways which is to say: impecuniously and not necessarily according to the rigors and

comforts of the bourgeois norm. There were no galleries — or hardly any — no museums, no shows dedicated to contemporary artists and no art publications other than what they managed to produce or stage themselves — sometimes with patronage on a scale which in today's terms was laughably scanty. Artists were not yet looked upon as prophetic 'creators' to be rewarded with vast fame and fortune for providing 'cultural' bona fides to an arrogant and corrupt planetary oligarchy obsessed with resource exploitation and social control.

Such people were sincerely interested in Art. They embraced the sacrifices they knew necessary to the artistic life for the sake of its rewards and delights. These did not include prospects of worldwide fame and fortune. Even eventually successful painters like Corot or Renoir did no more than make a decent living. If painters like Picasso and Matisse, or tricksters like Dali (whom I was lucky enough to meet on several occasions in New York in the 1970s), were already vaguely known to the general public, and unquestionably heroes in the bohemian milieu, they were not yet the popular and iconic 'cultural' giants they were to become after the war. Before the war, and despite the now famous controversies among the surrealists, the agitations for and against abstraction and so on, there was what might be called an artistic brotherhood, a community of artistic values and aspirations. The painters, poets and composers knew of each other, and often knew each other personally. Nothing like any of this exists today, apart from the larping.

The diaries of Jacques-Emile Blanche (1861-1942) show us this world. Blanche, who as a boy spent much time in Manet's studio, knew, and painted portraits, of virtually every painter, writer and composer of his day, both in France and England. It is understandable that he, and many other important artists of the period, have dropped out of our awareness. It is inevitable and useful to have simplified and synthetic introductions to complex matters like the history of painting. But ever since I discovered a small painting by Jacques-Emile Blanche in the museum of Albi, he has been an important influence on my own work. His diaries, always translated and published in English, were widely appreciated prior to the war. In those diaries, to say nothing of the journals of Andre Gide, the conversations of Vollard and other writings, it is possible to learn about the actual concerns and preoccupations of the 'modernists'. These first hand testimonies give the lie to the smoothly rationalized narratives which pollute popular notions of the period pushed by the likes of Ebert. The history of painting is large and complex. We cannot expect it to be presented in all its aspects by theorists and critics. We might expect, however, that it be presented fairly. There is no excuse for people like Ebert who crouch in dark corners spinning webs of lies, when the truth of these matters is easy to learn.

Already, by the end of the 19th century, the so called 'academy' had been partly convinced of 'modernist' — in fact reactionary\* —

\* In Ambroise Vollard's conversations with Renior, published in 1938, speaking of impressionism Renoir brushed aside all theoretical talk about light and the spectrum: "We just wanted to use bright colors again, like the old masters!"



ideas so that, if ideologically hampered approaches such as bouguereauism persisted, impressionism and Cezanne, or so called 'post-impressionism' — what I call '2d wave modernism' — had an important influence. Despite the famous exclusion of the Impressionist from the Salon in 1863, the 'academy' had never been a fortress, and so called 'academic' painting from the latter part of the 19th century, and beginning of the 20th, shows all kinds of 'modernist' influence. It is hard to get a feeling for this without travelling to out of the way places, provincial museums and churches, where the work of painters one has never heard of can be experienced, painters who don't fit the tidy narratives of the John David Eberts of this world, and give the lie to his sweeping assertions.

## Aesthetics and Art

Aesthetics are related to Art but Art is not equal to aesthetics. This is true because everything is aesthetic. Looked at in the right spirit a heap of dung is an aesthetic object no less than the Mona Lisa. But not everyone is visually oriented. Not everyone is concerned with beauty, much less Art; for such people 'Art' is what is indicated to them as such, just as I trust my mechanic to indicate the proper fuel for my car. I have no more sensitivity to the problem of the relation of fuels to motors — though it is a matter constantly absorbing the attention of thousands of intelligent and energetic persons — than some people have to painting. But for a person such as myself, for whom art is a constant concern, and because aesthetics are an aspect of art, I, and people like myself, have aesthetic consciousness.<sup>†</sup> Having an aesthetic consciousness means seeing the beauty in everything; not only a bright sunny day but the charm of mist and rain, not only a fresh and youthful face but the experience, pain and wisdom carved into the countenance of those nearing death. Aesthetic consciousness means receptivity to the messages of things seen, heard, sensed or tasted. Having aesthetic consciousness may be 'artistic', but is not the same as being an artist. It is important to being an artist, in certain ways, but it is by no means the only thing needful. And just because everything is included in aesthetic experience or, to put it another way, just because everything is aesthetic, does not mean everything is Art.

Art is distinct from aesthetics in the same way that daily life is distinguished from a love relationship. Such a relationship may be lived everyday, and may express itself though certain banal and ordinary activities but those activities, as such, are not the relation-

<sup>†</sup> I do not mean to denigrate lack of aesthetic consciousness! It takes all kinds to make a world, and those who lack aesthetic consciousness may well have other kinds of consciousness, to which I lack sensitivity, which opens aspects of the world to them which are closed to me.



First painting made under the influence of Jacques-Emile Blanche-1995? Such interiors were a large part of the work by which I supported myself as a painter for many years. In this sense I own some of my livelihood to J-E Blanche.

ship of love. They may, to the contrary, be a source of conflict which the relationship of love must overcome in order to persist. In the same way there is an aspect of aesthetics which interferes with Art.

Aesthetic experience, for example, has nothing to do with taste. Since anything and everything is aesthetic, an aesthetic experience might involve things which are in bad taste — or let us say, not in the best taste. We might look at extremely perverted tastes which offer striking examples of the problem, but let's take an artistic example: enthusiasm for the art of Frank Frazetta. It is easy to admire Frazetta and have a powerful aesthetic experience with his work. But people who turn to seri-

ous painting are handicapped by the poor taste which gives to Frazetta, in their eyes, a rank he does not deserve. My point is not to denigrate Frazetta. I enjoy him as much as the next person. But I know the difference between a drawing by Frazetta and a drawing by Watteau. Frazetta is fun, skillful, and a bit naughty. Watteau is . . . cosmic. Failure to perceive this difference is a failure of taste. It is not a moral fault but it is an artistic handicap. But the aesthetic sense of those who lack the taste to understand the relative ranks of Frazetta and Watteau may be as acute and alive as in those who do. Taste depends on our natural disposition, our orientation or choices, and our training. The aesthetic sense, by contrast, is like vision or hearing. As such it is undirected. Taste is preference. The aesthetic sense can carry us into raptures; our taste discriminates among our raptures.

To know what 'art' is we must understand that it is not aesthetics, and that aesthetics are not taste. Having an aesthetic sense as well as good taste probably helps an artist, but they are not enough to make one a good painter. Other elements are as important, and more important, and these make Art what it is, namely mastery of the art in question, understanding its nature, learning its practice, and following proper directions. The nature of drawing must be the first preoccupation of the draftsman. That nature has nothing to do with aesthetics and taste. Aesthetics and taste had probably better get involved but, as such, they are secondary to the draftsman as draftsman, to the artist as artist.

## The Banal Object

The Ready-mades were a game Duchamp played with himself, which he describes in interviews on YouTube; so there is no need to take any of this on my authority. What I contend here can be swiftly verified or debunked in the words of Duchamp himself. His game, then, was to search for objects which had, for him, no



aesthetic charge. He was not searching for objects that were 'banal'. He was not searching for Art. He was not trying to make Art through some kind of willful choice out of Ebert's 'midden heap' of banal things. He was not revolutionizing the nature of art by reducing it to pure nietzschean will. He was, as he says, searching for things which had no aesthetic impact on him. He eventually found 13. At some point he called them 'Ready-mades' because that is what they all turned out to be. None of the Ready-mades are natural or crafted things. All are industrial products. Was this a discovery for Duchamp about the nature of our technological society about which thoughtful people began to comment as the 20th century progressed?

The Ready-mades, for Duchamp, were objects of a very particular nature: a negative zone in his aesthetic sense. But the presence, the awareness, of negatives reveals the positive. Duchamp's game, then, was exploring, or fine tuning, his aesthetic sense. In so doing he was honing, testing and training an aspect of his artistic nature. If we set aside the ironic remarks which are Duchamp's most famous statements, he never claimed the Ready-mades were Art. He did not rush out to show them. He kept them to himself for 26 years. They were his private 'game', and certainly a thing to share with his friends.

It was some of these friends who eventually persuaded him to show the Ready-mades. They also persuaded him to make signed limited editions to sell. When merchants take over and start advertising, it's like love and war: all is fair. Of course the Ready-mades were sold as 'art' — what else? — and the reason anyone bought them was not because of their intrinsic qualities but because of Duchamp's reputation. Neither the declarations of hucksters nor the reputation of anyone, however interesting or famous, make a thing art. Picasso often settled his restaurant bills by signing a napkin. These signed napkins are still trading for large sums, though the faddish attitude that gives them so much value may be fading. They are valuable because people are ready to pay for them. But that doesn't make them 'art'. People pay for many things which are not art. The Ready-mades and Picasso's napkins are 'artifacts' in the same way an arrowhead from the stone age is, but they are not Art.

## A Fake Truth

The commercial discourse around the Ready-mades and the abuse of Duchamp's irony, have established the unfortunate notion that the Ready-mades are 'art'. But we are not obliged to be stupid or gullible, to follow the crowd and accept a lie, even if a multi-trillion dollar mercantilist empire has been founded on that lie.

Duchamp, even after he had become an international star and was proclaimed the pope of 'a very different kind of art from anything that has ever been practiced in the past', continued to live a quiet and secluded life. He had profited from the patronage of Walter Arensberg but it was only natural, and perhaps even necessary at the time, that he get a bit of money for himself. The argument that Duchamp's cooperation in the marketing of the Ready-mades endorses the use which 'contemporary artists' and the Eberts of this world make of it, is unfair and manipulative but it justifies what has happened to Art. Duchamp's attempt to calm the neo-dadaists with 'rasée', his 'praise' of Warhol's 'happenings' as an innovation which "makes art out of boredom", have had zero effect, except on those who, like himself, are truly interested in Art. When it comes to Art, those are the only people who count.

This does not mean that Duchamp is without some responsibility in all this. He did make quiet 'duchampian' efforts to correct it. His life is an example of devotion to Art; he was indifferent to fame and money. But few take note of those things to model their attitude on his. The last years of his life were devoted to creating

a work of art which not even his friends were aware of. He allowed everyone to believe he had abandoned art! It was his final trick. Duchamp was a profoundly secretive and private person. He was, furthermore, a certain kind of frenchman; the irony and humor, the nice discriminations, the quiet extravagance — he was a certain kind of man, as well as an exceptional man, who lived in a certain time and reacted to it in certain interesting ways. In the light of history some of his actions were irresponsible. But it was another time, and I can understand and sympathize with his part in what has turned out to be a very unhappy mess. I can also see that Duchamp never considered the Ready-mades to be Art. They



Portrait of a Dutch girl, 1998? oil on wood, by P. Rhoads

were part of his intimate adventure, and as such they can have legitimate interest for us. Meanwhile the narrative now firmly woven round them justifies activities and pretensions which have nothing to do with who Duchamp was or what he did. They are vulgar travesties.

Ebert claims that Duchamp, by recontextualizing banal objects, by rescuing them from his 'midden heap' of shattered remnants of the macrosphere, the dung and flotsam of the so called 'meta-physical age', blazed the trail for the 'new kind of art' of the so called 'post-metaphysical age'. But the post-metaphysical age is not a thing. It's a rationalization to justify the claim that things which are not Art, are Art, that 'artists' who are not artists, are artists. That is all it is. Wind; bla bla.

In the howl of this Ebertian wind we lose Duchamp's message: look carefully at all that is around, feel its message, delve into the



problem of beauty, of your reactions, of your relation to the manifest, your relation to your own sensibilities. Duchamp was exploring for himself the limits of his aesthetic reactions, the limits of different aspects of Art. Duchamp's game, if it proves anything, proves not that anything is art if it is recontextualized, but that the aesthetics which are everywhere, are even so not equal: some are more aesthetic than others. What does that imply about you and your reactions?

Art, as Duchamp suggests, is indeed the gesture of an artist, but the true duchampian artist, if he might surprise and delight us, is not a creature of idiosyncratic caprice. Duchamp's 13 Ready-mades are not proof that the most banal objects are art, but a reminder to artistic spirits that such things might relate to art via their own aesthetic experience — or that even the most unexpected things, even the flotsam of our industrial society, can point towards poetry.

It seems that Duchamp's game 'failed'. Did he actually find objects which had no aesthetic charge for him? If he did at first, over the years, at least for us the Ready-mades have taken on aesthetic conviction. They seem to teach that our awareness and sympathies may be raised to surprising heights. It may be an old lesson, but it is worth learning anew, especially in our time.

But pointers towards poetry hidden in the human experience are not, as such, Art, and pretending they are perverts their duchampian usefulness. Instead of refining and elevating our sensibilities, they embolden social authorities who, instead of pointing towards Art as they ought, point to things which are not Art and say "There is Art!" thus perverting and deadening the sensibilities of those who heed them. No longer quietly graceful negative spaces in aesthetic experience pointing towards Art, they are now trophies of an obscurantist and murderous oligarchy who, with shouting and debauchery, parade them like severed heads on the end of a pike.

So, despite Duchamp, every 'contemporary artist' is idiosyncratically constructing a private world, their own semiosphere with their own logic, grabbing up handfuls of dung from the 'midden heap' and flinging it hysterically in the face of anyone and everyone, while drawing round themselves the rent and soiled mantle of Art and loudly reveling in their

prophetic status.

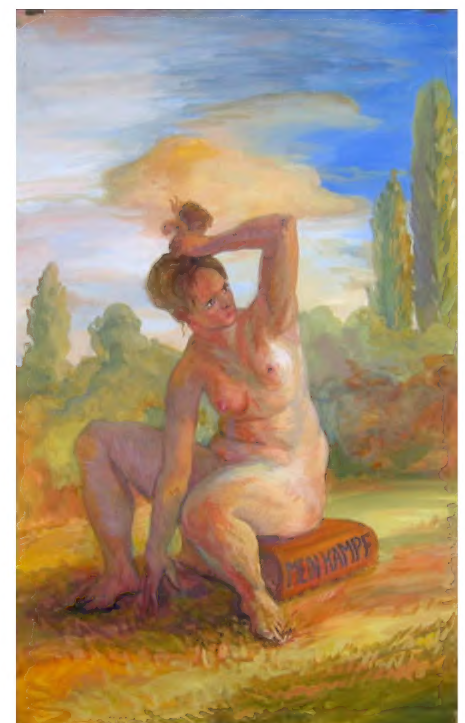
## Universal Transcendent Logic

Ebert is comfortable with this desecration. He justifies and lauds it. But how can he explain it with such ease? How can he encompass each semiosphere and learn each idiosyncratic logic? How can he pretend to his seamless, universal and lucid comprehension of the very things he proclaims to be incomprehensible, of such a nature that understanding them is impossible, for they are unrelated, mutually incompatible, each with its own logic, its own language?

To grasp the inner meaning of all cultures across all time, to explain the idiosyncratic semiospheres of each 'contemporary artist', Ebert must possess an understanding which encompasses all ages and all semiospheres.

Such understanding, which allows him to tell a story in which each age and each 'contemporary artist' has its place, must be founded, or at least translated into, a logic shared by all. But as actual languages, which can be translated into each other, share a foundation of experience and meaning, so the logics of the semiospheres, as translated by Ebert into English, share that experience and meaning.

Ebert's procedure, as he explains it, is to learn the private code of each idiosyncratic semiotic sphere, and its logic. This might seem a mighty task, like going to Mongolia to learn the language and ways of the people, a project that requires years. But, as it turns out, an idiosyncratic semiosphere, with its own logic, is not





difficult to understand. It takes only a matter of minutes: the time required for the 'artist' to explain it — and since there turns out to be so little to explain . . .

Be that as it may, once you have the code you can understand the 'art', art which is a very different kind of art from anything that has ever been practiced in the past, and translate it easily and directly into common language, thereby including it in a universal history graspable by the meanest intelligence.

One wonders why Ebert makes so much fuss about idiosyncratic semiospheres and their logic, if getting the code, and slipping the info into a universal history, is so easy?

Perhaps the code creation, too, is simpler than it seems? As Ebert states it, the process is as follows: the 'artist' must "salvage ruptured signifiers from 'being' to fill semiotic vacancies, thus giving these ruptured signifiers new and unprecedented meanings — such meanings being no longer binary, as in the past when they were true or false, but now a matter of degree."

...

I could amuse myself, and possibly my readers, by analyzing each word of this wonderful statement, exploring what Ebert thinks he means by 'being', or how a 'meaning', as meaning, could ever have been 'false', to say nothing of his more ridiculous jargonizing. But I will forbear. The man is a joke, a charlatan, a juggler of words, a fire eater of phrases, he is a man behind a curtain yelping at us to 'pay no attention to that man behind the curtain', and any further evisceration of him would be graceless.

But the question of 'contemporary art' is much simpler than Ebert makes it out: 'contemporary artists' are fakes. They understand nothing about Art and care less. What interests them is money and fame. To get at these, they use the massive prestige of Art accumulated over the centuries, thanks to the masters of painting and the other arts. As for Art, they have tossed it aside, and chased out the real artists with marxist inspired slurs such as "garbage of history", "fascist" and "nostalgic copycat". They have stormed and occupied all the institutions upon which Art as a social phenomenon depends. Then, with lies about artists like Marcel Duchamp and word salads such as Ebert concocts, they redefine 'art' as any damn thing, with which they fill their captive galleries and museums, which actually function as money laundering operations for drug lords and other crooks, as well as organs of prestige.

It would be hilarious if it were not dragging uncounted aspiring artists into dead-end lives and depriving the rest of us of important and beautiful parts of the society which, by rights, we should have inherited.

'Contemporary art' and 'contemporary artist' are criminals. John David Ebert is their flatterer, enabler, justifier and priest. He is aiding and abetting a crime against humanity: the destruction of Art and Poetry.



'Queen's Pawn Crowned', 1953, plaster and metal. Aaron Kurzen

Aaron Kurzen (1920–2022) became a 'disciple' of Duchamp in the 1930s, whom he met through the woman he would marry after the war. The latter took him overseas from 1923 to 1945. Kurzen considered himself a surreal-

ist. I became Aaron's student, assistant and 'disciple' in the 1970s. Already, in the 1950s, the use being made of Duchamp was clear to Aaron.